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Mr. Schlesinger of CIA

By Benjamin Welles

James R. Schlesinger, newly named head of the Central Intelligence Agency, comes to the job unhampered by previous intelligence experience — unlike his predecessor, Richard M. Helms, a life long veteran of clandestine operations.

Mr. Schlesinger is a tall, craggy, systems analyst with a habit of working in his shirtsleeves. If, while conferring with his colleagues his shirttail hangs out — as it often does — it bothers him not. Calm, relaxed, analytical, he can lose himself in a problem while the hours slip by.

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Those who knew Schlesinger in his OMB (Office of Management and Budget) days — where he drafted for President Nixon a plan to reorganize the national intelligence community — praise his ability to spot the weakness in an argument or structure — and quickly find ways to strengthen it. He has already begun to humanize the secrecy-shrouded Atomic Energy Commission, and in his next post he is expected to rid the CIA and its sister intelligence agencies of their accumulated fat and improve their product.

"I predict he's going to drop some of the veteran cold warriors from World War II or the Korean days and promote younger men," said one of his closest associates. "He'll leave day-to-day operation in their hands and concentrate on matters of Cabinet-level importance. Each time he goes to the White House you can bet he'll know his subject from A to Z."

The three areas that Mr. Schlesinger is expected to focus on include first the CIA's clandestine operations — still reportedly absorbing about $400 million of its $600 million budget and more than half of its 15,000 employees. Others are scientific research and the voluminous, often controversial, national intelligence estimates. The latter, insofar as they forecast Soviet and Chinese capabilities and intentions, have an immense impact on presidential budgetary and defense policies.

In recent years the CIA, which alone is authorized to conduct espionage abroad and, occasionally, to topple unfriendly governments, has had its funds for "CS" (clandestine services) appreciably slashed. Such paramilitary CIA operations as the "secret" war in Laos, begun on President Kennedy's instructions in 1962, now are drawing to a close; and the weekly meetings of the Forty Committee, the supersecret White House panel headed by Kissinger that passes on all covert operations sufficiently important to embarrass the United States Government if disclosed, are said to be desultory, indeed.

"Intelligence gathering has shifted from the spy in a foreign cabinet to the orbiting satellites that collect hundreds of photographs plus telemetric intercepts," says a qualified source. "But there's a danger. I can show you photographs of Washington down to the minutest details of the White House lawns — but you still won't know what's going on inside the heads of the policymakers."

The brilliant high-resolution photographs of Russian and Chinese missile silos, nuclear plants, airfields, and submarine pens that are collected day after day (when the weather permits) by $20 million satellites orbiting around the earth every 90 minutes 100 to 130 miles up make possible the SALT agreements. The U.S. and the Russians, who too have their satellites, each know what the other has; now and a-building. But whereas capabilities can often be ascertained through satellites — intentions require spies. In CIA jargon this is called "hum-int" — human intelligence.

Some experts even question whether the U.S. intelligence community has anything "downstream" — in development — to replace the spy satellites should the Russians or Chinese one day shoot them down or otherwise eliminate this vital security safeguard. Apparently the community is fearful of seeking fresh funds lest Congress or the OMB cut back the funds already allocated: $1 billion yearly for spy satellites and as much for global code-breaking.

Mr. Schlesinger is expected, finally, to take a hard look at the overt — or evaluation — side of his CIA. Part of it, the Office of National Estimates, produces yearly for the President studies ranging from a quick analysis of the latest Central American flare-up to the massive survey, completed every September, of Soviet strength and likely actions.

Periodically domestic politics impinge on intelligence evaluations. Secretary Laird told Congress flatly in 1969, for instance, the U.S.S.R. was going for a "first strike capability"; i.e., had succeeded in MIRVing its giant SS-9 missiles — giving each component warhead the same independently targetable capability as have the U.S. Polaris and Poseidon missiles. CIA disputed this at the time — and still does — but none the less Kissinger sided with Laird's effort to pry more defense funds from Congress.

Whether Mr. Schlesinger can now insulate the CIA from administration pressure and keep its reporting honest remains to be seen. He comes to his task, however, with full Nixon backing; with no ties to the cold war; with few contacts in the press and with little interest in the social blandishments of the "Georgetown cocktail set."

Mr. Welles, for many years on the staff of the New York Times, is now an independent commentator on what goes on in Washington.